

# Bertram James "B.J." Theobald

*Intelligencer*

Remember when ....

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## Fresh garden vegetables fed hungry

## hoboes in early '40s

Belleville's reputation as The Friendly City was built on good deeds done by city residents like CNR Car Foreman Bertram James "B.J." Theobald.

In the first few years after the Great Depression, hoboes who continued to travel the railway looking for food and shelter quickly realized they had a friend in Theobald. When these hungry men tumbled out of their boxcar homes and onto the streets of Belleville, Theobald never turned a blind eye.

Instead, Theobald and his wife, Mabel, took it upon themselves to feed the hoboes a good lunch. Barb Bertrim, their daughter, remembers her mother putting food on the porch of their 240 MacDonald

Ave. home for the drifters every day.

"My Dad was a car foreman. If he saw (the hoboes) get off the cars, he would tell them where to go, he'd call my mother and she would prepare the sandwiches and get the vegetables ready and put them on the porch," Bertrim recalls.

The vegetables that fed the Theobalds and the drifters came from the huge garden they inherited when they bought the house, she says.

"She never invited them in, but they came every day. She was very thoughtful that way because she was very thankful we had food on the table."

Perhaps giving away food was easier for the Theobald family than for many others. It was 1942, and they had just moved into the house that was apparently the home of James Roy's gardener. Roy, whose 245 Victoria Ave. home was recently featured in Remember When... (Dec. 12), was a prominent and well liked brewer and maltster in Belleville at the turn of the century.

And his garden was, reportedly, magnificent.

By the time the Theobalds moved in, Roy had died and his house burned down. Bertrim remembers her father bought the gardener's house from Dr. Tennant, who sold the Roy house (before the fire) to the Catholic nuns for \$1.

Without the Roy house, the Theobald home was the only house on the block.

"We had quite a bit of land there...We had the whole block to ourselves. You wouldn't believe the trees, huge trees...Kids had a lot of fun there," Bertrim recalls.

"It was really a fabulous place to grow up," she says.

To Bertrim and other children in the area, the remains of the Roy house were a great exploring ground. Although they never found anything very valuable, Bertrim remembers finding a piece of amethyst which she held onto for years and later gave to her daughter.

"There were places where you could see ruins of carriage houses. It was a fun place to explore. We found the usual things — broken dishes, cutlery, burnt things," Bertrim says.

Neighborhood kids held ball games on the land, and across the street (which was still part of Thurlow Township at that time) they played at the figure skating club, the tennis club and in the hills.

The house itself was triple brick (Bertrim's husband Keith believes), and Bertrim remembers all the rooms were big.

"It was plain, but it was nice. We were sorry when he sold it," she says.

Bertrim, however, has especially fond memories of the garden. She compares it to an English country garden. Both Bertrim and her younger sister Lois (now Lois Taylor of Shannonville) held backyard wedding receptions at the home.

Bertrim also has three older brothers, Gordon, who still lives in Belleville, Harvey and Alan, and a younger brother Stuart, who lives in Addison, Illinois.

Theobald sold the house to

Dr. Miranda in the late 1960s. In about 1980 the house was sold to Edward and Suzanne Bowen, and around 1984 it was sold to Dr. Bert and Lois Conn. David and Helen Buffett moved in around 1986, and Stewart Stanley occupied the house in 1990.

Theobald died at 84, in 1978.

Prior to Theobald, in 1940 the house was occupied by Fred Devenish, a clerk at the Bank of Montreal, Mrs. J.B. Freeland and G.B. Carrier occupied the house in 1938, and W.C. Ristow, a purchase agent for Stewart-Warner, lived in the house in 1936.

From at least 1899 to 1934, E.H. LaRoche, a Custom House broker and general insurance agent, lived in the house. Who exactly was Roy's gardener is not known.



Barb (Theobald) Bertrim and husband Keith at their garden wedding reception, Sept. 8, 1951.

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